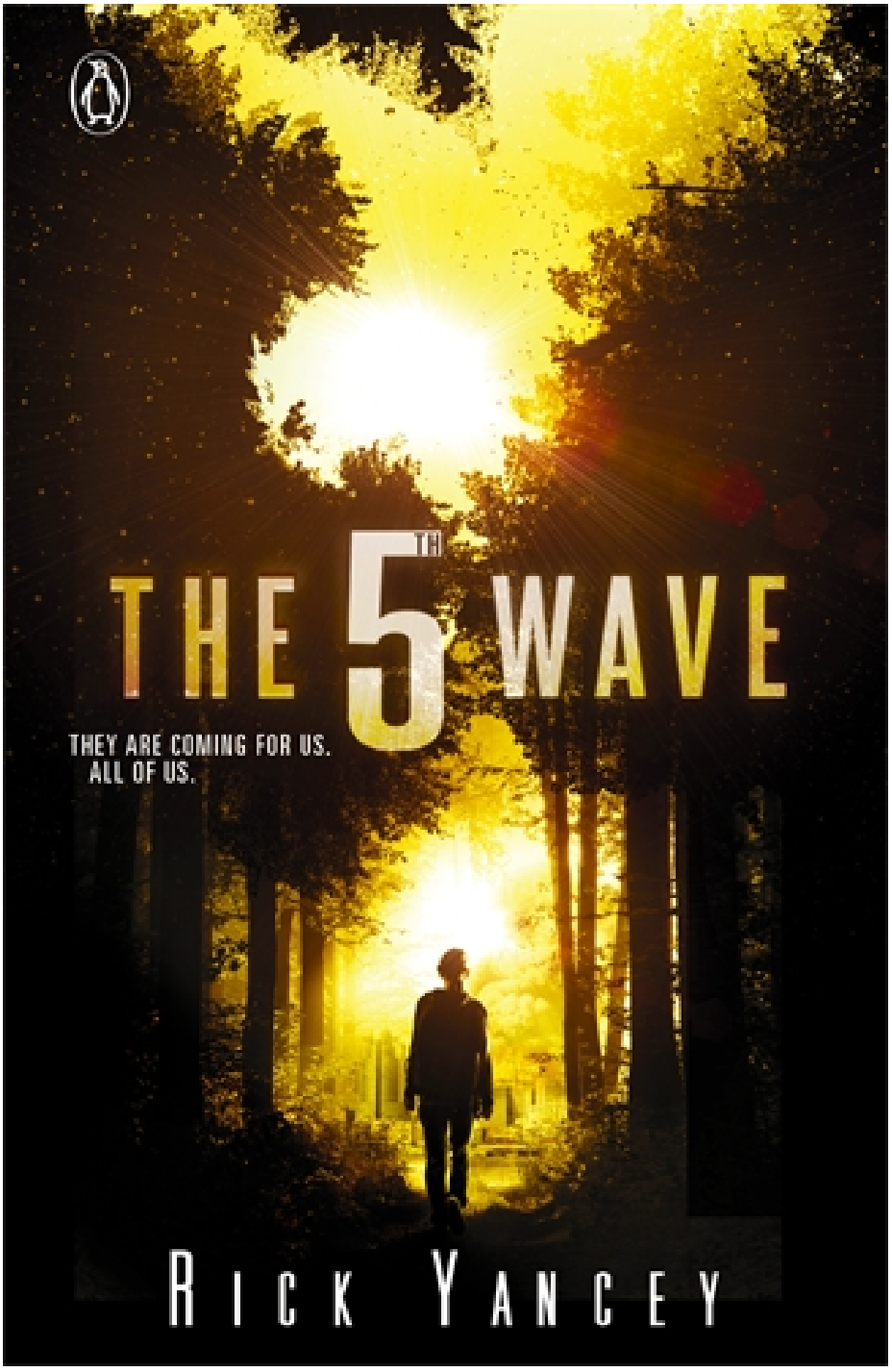
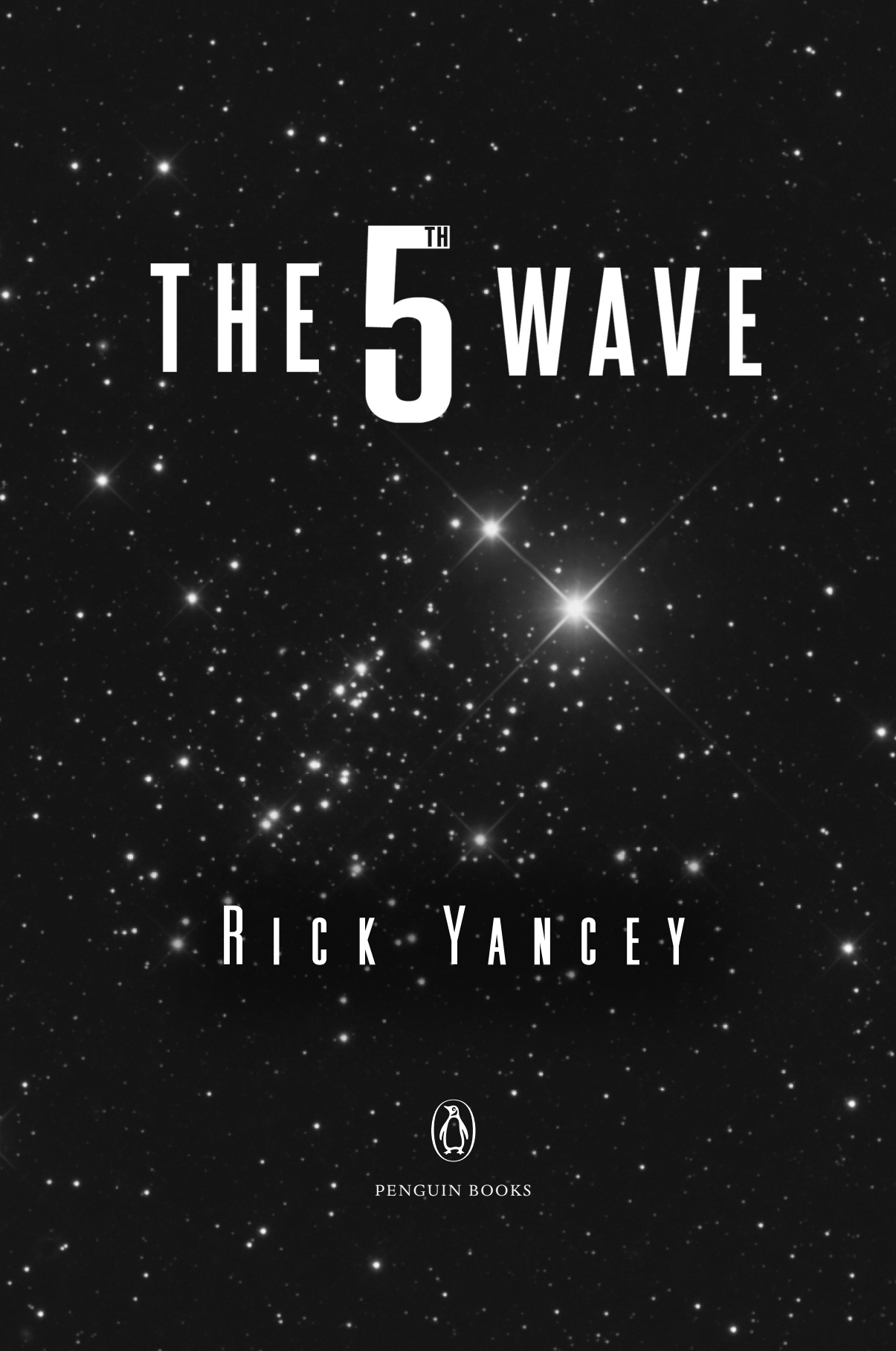

THE 5TH WAVE
THEY ARE COMING FOR US.
ALL OF US.
RICK YANCEY

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE 5TH WAVE




THE 5TH WAVE
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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Sandy,
whose dreams inspire
and whose love endures

IF ALIENS EVER VISIT US, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans.

—Stephen Hawking

THE 1ST WAVE: *Lights Out*

THE 2ND WAVE: *Surf's Up*

THE 3RD WAVE: *Pestilence*

THE 4TH WAVE: *Silencer*

THE 5TH WAVE

INTRUSION: 1995

THERE WILL BE NO AWAKENING.

The sleeping woman will feel nothing the next morning, only a vague sense of unease and the unshakable feeling that someone is watching her. Her anxiety will fade in less than a day and will soon be forgotten.

The memory of the dream will linger a little longer.

In her dream, a large owl perches outside the window, staring at her through the glass with huge, white-rimmed eyes.

She will not awaken. Neither will her husband beside her. The shadow falling over them will not disturb their sleep. And what the shadow has come for—the baby within the sleeping woman—will feel nothing. The intrusion breaks no skin, violates not a single cell of her or the baby's body.

It is over in less than a minute. The shadow withdraws.

Now it is only the man, the woman, the baby inside her, and the intruder inside the baby, sleeping.

The woman and man will awaken in the morning, the baby a few months later when he is born.

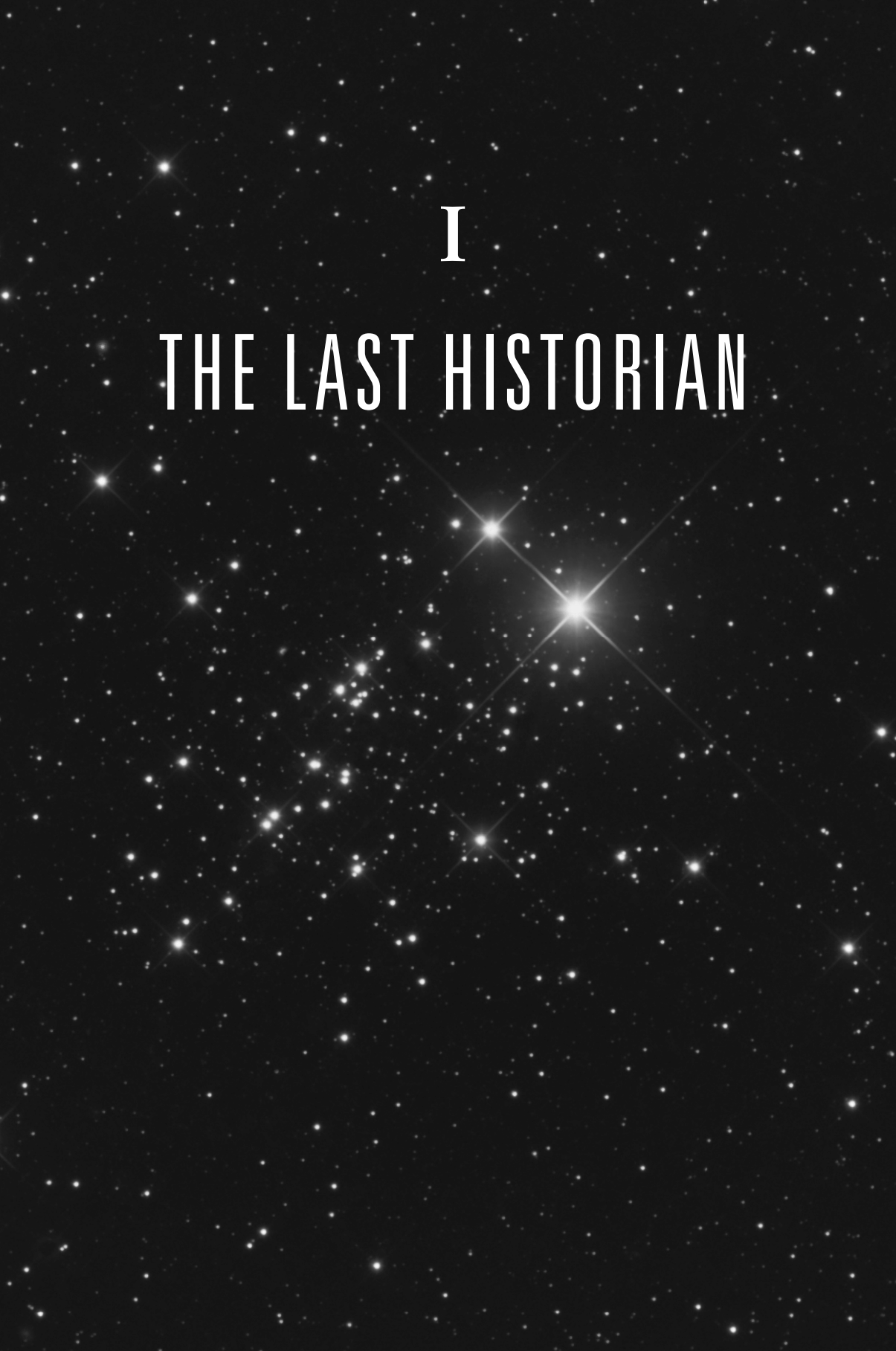
The intruder inside him will sleep on and not wake for several years, when the unease of the child's mother and the memory of that dream have long since faded.

Five years later, at a visit to the zoo with her child, the woman will see an owl identical to the one in the dream. Seeing the owl is unsettling for reasons she cannot understand.

She is not the first to dream of owls in the dark.

She will not be the last.





I

THE LAST HISTORIAN

1

ALIENS ARE STUPID.

I'm not talking about real aliens. The Others aren't stupid. The Others are so far ahead of us, it's like comparing the dumbest human to the smartest dog. No contest.

No, I'm talking about the aliens inside our own heads.

The ones we made up, the ones we've been making up since we realized those glittering lights in the sky were suns like ours and probably had planets like ours spinning around them. You know, the aliens we imagine, the kind of aliens we'd *like* to attack us, human aliens. You've seen them a million times. They swoop down from the sky in their flying saucers to level New York and Tokyo and London, or they march across the countryside in huge machines that look like mechanical spiders, ray guns blasting away, and always, always, humanity sets aside its differences and bands together to defeat the alien horde. David slays Goliath, and everybody (except Goliath) goes home happy.

What crap.

It's like a cockroach working up a plan to defeat the shoe on its way down to crush it.

There's no way to know for sure, but I bet the Others knew about the human aliens we'd imagined. And I bet they thought it was funny as hell. They must have laughed their asses off. If they have a sense of humor . . . or asses. They must have laughed the way we laugh when a dog does something totally cute and dorky.

Oh, those cute, dorky humans! They think we think like they do! Isn't that adorable?

Forget about flying saucers and little green men and giant mechanical spiders spitting out death rays. Forget about epic battles with tanks and fighter jets and the final victory of us scrappy, unbroken, intrepid humans over the bug-eyed swarm. That's about as far from the truth as their dying planet was from our living one.

The truth is, once they found us, we were toast.

2

SOMETIMES I THINK I might be the last human on Earth.

Which means I'm the last human in the universe.

I know that's dumb. They can't have killed everyone . . . yet. I see how it could happen, though, eventually. And then I think that's exactly what the Others want me to see.

Remember the dinosaurs? Well.

So I'm probably not the last human on Earth, but I'm one of the last. Totally alone—and likely to stay that way—until the 4th Wave rolls over me and carries me down.

That's one of my night thoughts. You know, the three-in-the-morning, oh-my-God-I'm-screwed thoughts. When I curl into a little ball, so scared I can't close my eyes, drowning in fear so intense I have to remind myself to breathe, will my heart to keep beating. When my brain checks out and begins to skip like a scratched CD. *Alone, alone, alone, Cassie, you're alone.*

That's my name. Cassie.

Not Cassie for Cassandra. Or Cassie for Cassidy. Cassie for Cassiopeia, the constellation, the queen tied to her chair in the northern sky, who was beautiful but vain, placed in the heavens by the sea god Poseidon as a punishment for her boasting. In Greek, her name means "she whose words excel."

My parents didn't know the first thing about that myth. They just thought the name was pretty.

Even when there were people around to call me anything, no one ever called me Cassiopeia. Just my father, and only when he was teasing me, and always in a very bad Italian accent: *Cass-ee-oh-PEE-a*. It drove me crazy. I didn't think he was funny or cute, and it made me hate my own name. "I'm Cassie!" I'd holler at him. "Just Cassie!" Now I'd give anything to hear him say it just one more time.

When I was turning twelve—four years before the Arrival—my father gave me a telescope for my birthday. On a crisp, clear fall evening, he set it up in the backyard and showed me the constellation.

"See how it looks like a *W*?" he asked.

"Why did they name it Cassiopeia if it's shaped like a *W*?" I replied. "*W* for what?"

"Well . . . I don't know that it's for anything," he answered with a smile. Mom always told him it was his best feature, so he trotted it out a lot, especially after he started going bald. You know, to drag the other person's eyes downward. "So, it's for anything you like! How about *wonderful*? Or *winsome*? Or *wise*?" He dropped his hand on my shoulder as I squinted through the lens at the five stars burning over fifty light-years from the spot on which we stood. I could feel my father's breath against my cheek,

warm and moist in the cool, dry autumn air. His breath so close, the stars of Cassiopeia so very far away.

The stars seem a lot closer now. Closer than the three hundred trillion miles that separate us. Close enough to touch, for me to touch them, for them to touch me. They're as close to me as his breath had been.

That sounds crazy. Am I crazy? Have I lost my mind? You can only call someone crazy if there's someone else who's normal. Like good and evil. If everything was good, then nothing would be good.

Whoa. That sounds, well . . . crazy.

Crazy: the new normal.

I guess I could call myself crazy, since there is one other person I can compare myself to: me. Not the me I am now, shivering in a tent deep in the woods, too afraid to even poke her head from the sleeping bag. Not this Cassie. No, I'm talking about the Cassie I was before the Arrival, before the Others parked their alien butts in high orbit. The twelve-year-old me, whose biggest problems were the spray of tiny freckles on her nose and the curly hair she couldn't do anything with and the cute boy who saw her every day and had no clue she existed. The Cassie who was coming to terms with the painful fact that she was just okay. Okay in looks. Okay in school. Okay at sports like karate and soccer. Basically the only unique things about her were the weird name—Cassie for Cassiopeia, which nobody knew about, anyway—and her ability to touch her nose with the tip of her tongue, a skill that quickly lost its impressiveness by the time she hit middle school.

I'm probably crazy by that Cassie's standards.

And she sure is crazy by mine. I scream at her sometimes, that

twelve-year-old Cassie, moping over her hair or her weird name or at being just okay. "What are you doing?" I yell. "Don't you know what's coming?"

But that isn't fair. The fact is she didn't know, had no way of knowing, and that was her blessing and why I miss her so much, more than anyone, if I'm being honest. When I cry—when I let myself cry—that's who I cry for. I don't cry for myself. I cry for the Cassie that's gone.

And I wonder what that Cassie would think of me.

The Cassie who kills.

3

HE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN much older than me. Eighteen. Maybe nineteen. But hell, he could have been seven *hundred* and nineteen for all I know. Five months into it and I'm still not sure if the 4th Wave is human or some kind of hybrid or even the Others themselves, though I don't like to think that the Others look just like us and talk just like us and bleed just like us. I like to think of the Others as being . . . well, other.

I was on my weekly foray for water. There's a stream not far from my campsite, but I'm worried it might be contaminated, either from chemicals or sewage or maybe a body or two upstream. Or poisoned. Depriving us of clean water would be an excellent way to wipe us out quickly.

So once a week I shoulder my trusty M16 and hike out of

the forest to the interstate. Two miles south, just off Exit 175, there're a couple of gas stations with convenience stores attached. I load up as much bottled water as I can carry, which isn't a lot because water is heavy, and get back to the highway and the relative safety of the trees as quickly as I can, before night falls completely. Dusk is the best time to travel. I've never seen a drone at dusk. Three or four during the day and a lot more at night, but never at dusk.

From the moment I slipped through the gas station's shattered front door, I knew something was different. I didn't *see* anything different—the store looked exactly like it had a week earlier, the same graffiti-scrawled walls, overturned shelves, floor strewn with empty boxes and caked-in rat feces, the busted-open cash registers and looted beer coolers. It was the same disgusting, stinking mess I'd waded through every week for the past month to get to the storage area behind the refrigerated display cases. Why people grabbed the beer and soda, the cash from the registers and safe, the rolls of lottery tickets, but left the two pallets of drinking water was beyond me. What were they thinking? *It's an alien apocalypse! Quick, grab the beer!*

The same disaster of spoilage, the same stench of rats and rotted food, the same fitful swirl of dust in the murky light pushing through the smudged windows, every out-of-place thing in its place, undisturbed.

Still.

Something was different.

I was standing in the little pool of broken glass just inside the doorway. I didn't see it. I didn't hear it. I didn't smell or feel it. But I knew it.

Something was different.

It's been a long time since humans were prey animals. A hundred thousand years or so. But buried deep in our genes the memory remains: the awareness of the gazelle, the instinct of the antelope. The wind whispers through the grass. A shadow flits between the trees. And up speaks the little voice that goes, *Shhhh, it's close now. Close.*

I don't remember swinging the M16 from my shoulder. One minute it was hanging behind my back, the next it was in my hands, muzzle down, safety off.

Close.

I'd never fired it at anything bigger than a rabbit, and that was a kind of experiment, to see if I could actually use the thing without blowing off one of my own body parts. Once I shot over the heads of a pack of feral dogs that had gotten a little too interested in my campsite. Another time nearly straight up, sighting the tiny, glowering speck of greenish light that was their mothership sliding silently across the backdrop of the Milky Way. Okay, I admit that was stupid. I might as well have erected a billboard with a big arrow pointing at my head and the words YOO-HOO, HERE I AM!

After the rabbit experiment—it blew that poor damn bunny apart, turning Peter into this unrecognizable mass of shredded guts and bone—I gave up the idea of using the rifle to hunt. I didn't even do target practice. In the silence that had slammed down after the 4th Wave struck, the report of the rounds sounded louder than an atomic blast.

Still, I considered the M16 my bestest of besties. Always by my side, even at night, burrowed into my sleeping bag with me,

faithful and true. In the 4th Wave, you can't trust that people are still people. But you can trust that your gun is still your gun.

Shhh, Cassie. It's close.

Close.

I should have bailed. That little voice had my back. That little voice is older than I am. It's older than the oldest person who ever lived.

I should have listened to that voice.

Instead, I listened to the silence of the abandoned store, listened hard. Something was close. I took a tiny step away from the door, and the broken glass crunched ever so softly under my foot.

And then the Something made a noise, somewhere between a cough and a moan. It came from the back room, behind the coolers, where my water was.

That's the moment when I didn't need a little old voice to tell me what to do. It was obvious, a no-brainer. Run.

But I didn't run.

The first rule of surviving the 4th Wave is don't trust anyone. It doesn't matter what they look like. The Others are very smart about that—okay, they're smart about everything. It doesn't matter if they look the right way and say the right things and act exactly like you expect them to act. Didn't my father's death prove that? Even if the stranger is a little old lady sweeter than your Great-aunt Tilly, hugging a helpless kitten, you can't know for certain—you can never know—that she isn't one of them, and that there isn't a loaded .45 behind that kitten.

It isn't unthinkable. And the more you think about it, the more thinkable it becomes. Little old lady has to go.

That's the hard part, the part that, if I thought about it too much,

would make me crawl into my sleeping bag, zip myself up, and die of slow starvation. If you can't trust anyone, then you can trust no one. Better to take the chance that Aunty Tilly is one of them than play the odds that you've stumbled across a fellow survivor.

That's friggin' diabolical.

It tears us apart. It makes us that much easier to hunt down and eradicate. The 4th Wave forces us into solitude, where there's no strength in numbers, where we slowly go crazy from the isolation and fear and terrible anticipation of the inevitable.

So I didn't run. I couldn't. Whether it was one of them or an Aunt Tilly, I had to defend my turf. The only way to stay alive is to stay alone. That's rule number two.

I followed the sobbing coughs or coughing sobs or whatever you want to call them till I reached the door that opened to the back room. Hardly breathing, on the balls of my feet.

The door was ajar, the space just wide enough for me to slip through sideways. A metal rack on the wall directly in front of me and, to the right, the long narrow hallway that ran the length of the coolers. There were no windows back here. The only light was the sickly orange of the dying day behind me, still bright enough to hurl my shadow onto the sticky floor. I crouched down; my shadow crouched with me.

I couldn't see around the edge of the cooler into the hall. But I could hear whoever—or whatever—it was at the far end, coughing, moaning, and that gurgling sob.

Either hurt badly or acting hurt badly, I thought. *Either needs help or it's a trap.*

This is what life on Earth has become since the Arrival. It's an either/or world.

Either it's one of them and it knows you're here or it's not one of them and he needs your help.

Either way, I had to get up and turn that corner.

So I got up.

And I turned the corner.

4

HE LAY SPRAWLED against the back wall twenty feet away, long legs spread out in front of him, clutching his stomach with one hand. He was wearing fatigues and black boots and he was covered in grime and shimmering with blood. There was blood everywhere. On the wall behind him. Pooling on the cold concrete beneath him. Coating his uniform. Matted in his hair. The blood glittered darkly, black as tar in the semidarkness.

In his other hand was a gun, and that gun was pointed at my head.

I mirrored him. His handgun to my rifle. Fingers flexing on the triggers: his, mine.

It didn't prove anything, his pointing a gun at me. Maybe he really was a wounded soldier and thought I was one of them.

Or maybe not.

"Drop your weapon," he sputtered at me.

Like hell.

"Drop your weapon!" he shouted, or tried to shout. The words came out all cracked and crumbly, beaten up by the blood rising

from his gut. Blood dribbled over his bottom lip and hung quivering from his stubbly chin. His teeth shone with blood.

I shook my head. My back was to the light, and I prayed he couldn't see how badly I was shaking or the fear in my eyes. This wasn't some damn rabbit that was stupid enough to hop into my camp one sunny morning. This was a person. Or, if it wasn't, it looked just like one.

The thing about killing is you don't know if you can actually do it until you actually do it.

He said it a third time, not as loud as the second. It came out like a plea.

"Drop your weapon."

The hand holding his gun twitched. The muzzle dipped toward the floor. Not much, but my eyes had adjusted to the light by this point, and I saw a speck of blood run down the barrel.

And then he dropped the gun.

It fell between his legs with a sharp *cling*. He brought up his empty hand and held it, palm outward, over his shoulder.

"Okay," he said with a bloody half smile. "Your turn."

I shook my head. "Other hand," I said. I hoped my voice sounded stronger than I felt. My knees had begun to shake and my arms ached and my head was spinning. I was also fighting the urge to hurl. You don't know if you can do it until you do it.

"I can't," he said.

"Other hand."

"If I move this hand, I'm afraid my stomach will fall out."

I adjusted the butt of the rifle against my shoulder. I was sweating, shaking, trying to think. *Either/or, Cassie. What are you going to do, either/or?*

"I'm dying," he said matter-of-factly. From this distance, his eyes were just pinpricks of reflected light. "So you can either finish me off or help me. I know you're human—"

"How do you know?" I asked quickly, before he could die on me. If he was a real soldier, he might know how to tell the difference. It would be an extremely useful bit of information.

"Because if you weren't, you would have shot me already." He smiled again, his cheeks dimpled, and that's when it hit me how young he was. Only a couple years older than me.

"See?" he said softly. "That's how you know, too."

"How I know what?" My eyes were tearing up. His crumpled-up body wiggled in my vision like an image in a fun-house mirror. But I didn't dare release my grip on the rifle to rub my eyes.

"That I'm human. If I wasn't, I would have shot you."

That made sense. Or did it make sense because I wanted it to make sense? Maybe he dropped the gun to get me to drop mine, and once I did, the second gun he was hiding under his fatigues would come out and the bullet would say hello to my brain.

This is what the Others have done to us. You can't band together to fight without trust. And without trust, there was no hope.

How do you rid the Earth of humans? Rid the humans of their humanity.

"I have to see your other hand," I said.

"I told you—"

"I have to see your other hand!" My voice cracked then. Couldn't help it.

He lost it. "Then you're just going to have to shoot me, bitch! Just shoot me and get it over with!"

His head fell back against the wall, his mouth came open, and a terrible howl of anguish tumbled out and bounced from wall

to wall and floor to ceiling and pounded against my ears. I didn't know if he was screaming from the pain or the realization that I wasn't going to save him. He had given in to hope, and that will kill you. It kills you before you die. Long before you die.

"If I show you," he gasped, rocking back and forth against the bloody concrete, "if I show you, will you help me?"

I didn't answer. I didn't answer because I didn't have an answer. I was playing this one nanosecond at a time.

So he decided for me. He wasn't going to let them win, that's what I think now. He wasn't going to stop hoping. If it killed him, at least he would die with a sliver of his humanity intact.

Grimacing, he slowly pulled out his left hand. Not much day left now, hardly any light at all, and what light there was seemed to be flowing away from its source, from him, past me and out the half-open door.

His hand was caked in half-dried blood. It looked like he was wearing a crimson glove.

The stunted light kissed his bloody hand and flicked along the length of something long and thin and metallic, and my finger yanked back on the trigger, and the rifle kicked against my shoulder hard, and the barrel bucked in my hand as I emptied the clip, and from a great distance I heard someone screaming, but it wasn't him screaming, it was me screaming, me and everybody else who was left, if there was anybody left, all of us helpless, hopeless, stupid humans screaming, because we got it wrong, we got it all wrong, there was no alien swarm descending from the sky in their flying saucers or big metal walkers like something out of *Star Wars* or cute little wrinkly E.T.s who just wanted to pluck a couple of leaves, eat some Reese's Pieces, and go home. That's not how it ends.

That's not how it ends at all.

It ends with us killing each other behind rows of empty beer coolers in the dying light of a late-summer day.

I went up to him before the last of the light was gone. Not to see if he was dead. I knew he was dead. I wanted to see what he was still holding in his bloody hand.

It was a crucifix.

5

THAT WAS THE LAST PERSON I've seen.

The leaves are falling heavy now, and the nights have turned cold. I can't stay in these woods. No leaves for cover from the drones, can't risk a campfire—I gotta get out of here.

I know where I have to go. I've known for a long time. I made a promise. The kind of promise you don't break because, if you break it, you've broken part of yourself, maybe the most important part.

But you tell yourself things. Things like, *I need to come up with something first. I can't just walk into the lion's den without a plan.* Or, *It's hopeless, there's no point anymore. You've waited too long.*

Whatever the reason I didn't leave before, I should have left the night I killed him. I don't know how he was wounded; I didn't examine his body or anything, and I should have, no matter how freaked out I was. I guess he could have gotten hurt in an accident, but the odds were better that someone—or something—had shot him. And if someone or something had shot him, that someone or

something was still out there . . . unless the Crucifix Soldier had offed her/him/them/it. Or he was one of them and the crucifix was a trick . . .

Another way the Others mess with your head: the uncertain circumstances of your certain destruction. Maybe that will be the 5th Wave, attacking us from the inside, turning our own minds into weapons.

Maybe the last human being on Earth won't die of starvation or exposure or as a meal for wild animals.

Maybe the last one to die will be killed by the last one alive.

Okay, that's not someplace you want to go, Cassie.

Honestly, even though it's suicide to stay here and I have a promise to keep, I don't want to leave. These woods have been home for a long time. I know every path, every tree, every vine and bush. I lived in the same house for sixteen years and I can't tell you exactly what my backyard looked like, but I can describe in detail every leaf and twig in this stretch of forest. I have no clue what's out there beyond these woods and the two-mile stretch of interstate I hike every week to forage for supplies. I'm guessing a lot more of the same: abandoned towns reeking of sewage and rotting corpses, burned-out shells of houses, feral dogs and cats, pileups that stretch for miles on the highway. And bodies. Lots and lots of bodies.

I pack up. This tent has been my home for a long time, but it's too bulky and I need to travel light. Just the essentials, with the Luger, the M16, the ammo, and my trusty bowie knife topping the list. Sleeping bag, first aid kit, five bottles of water, three boxes of Slim Jims, and some tins of sardines. I hated sardines before the Arrival. Now I've developed a real taste for them. First thing I look for when I hit a grocery store? Sardines.

Books? They're heavy and take up room in my already bulging backpack. But I have a thing about books. So did my father. Our house was stacked floor to ceiling with every book he could find after the 3rd Wave took out more than 3.5 billion people. While the rest of us scrounged for potable water and food and stocked up on the weaponry for the last stand we were sure was coming, Daddy was out with my little brother's Radio Flyer carting home the books.

The mind-blowing numbers didn't faze him. The fact that we'd gone from seven billion strong to a couple hundred thousand in four months didn't shake his confidence that our race would survive.

"We have to think about the future," he insisted. "When this is over, we'll have to rebuild nearly every aspect of civilization."

Solar flashlight.

Toothbrush and paste. I'm determined, when the time comes, to at least go out with clean teeth.

Gloves. Two pairs of socks, underwear, travel-size box of Tide, deodorant, and shampoo. (Gonna go out clean. See above.)

Tampons. I'm constantly worrying about my stash and if I'll be able to find more.

My plastic baggie stuffed with pictures. Dad. Mom. My little brother, Sammy. My grandparents. Lizbeth, my best friend. One of Ben You-Were-Some-Kind-of-Serious-Gorgeous Parish, clipped from my yearbook, because Ben was my future boyfriend and/or/maybe future husband—not that he knew it. He barely knew I existed. I knew some of the same people he knew, but I was a girl in the background, several degrees of separation removed. The only thing wrong with Ben was his height: He was six inches taller than me. Well, make that two things now: his height and the fact that he's dead.

My cell phone. It was fried in the 1st Wave, and there's no way to charge it. Cell towers don't work, and there's no one to call if they did. But, you know, it's my cell phone.

Nail clippers.

Matches. I don't light fires, but at some point I may need to burn something or blow it up.

Two spiral-bound notebooks, college ruled, one with a purple cover, the other red. My favorite colors, plus they're my journals. It's part of the hope thing. But if I am the last and there's no one left to read them, maybe an alien will and they'll know exactly what I think of them. In case you're an alien and you're reading this:

BITE ME.

My Starburst, already culled of the orange. Three packs of Wrigley's Spearmint. My last two Tootsie Pops.

Mom's wedding ring.

Sammy's ratty old teddy bear. Not that it's mine now. Not that I ever cuddle with it or anything.

That's everything I can stuff into the backpack. Weird. Seems like too much and not enough.

Still room for a couple of paperbacks, barely. *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Grapes of Wrath*? The poems of Sylvia Plath or Sammy's Shel Silverstein? Probably not a good idea to take the Plath. Depressing. Silverstein is for kids, but it still makes me smile. I decide to take *Huckleberry* (seems appropriate) and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. See you there soon, Shel. Climb aboard, Jim.

I heave the backpack over one shoulder, sling the rifle over the other, and head down the trail toward the highway. I don't look back.

I pause inside the last line of trees. A twenty-foot embankment runs down to the southbound lanes, littered with disabled cars,

piles of clothing, shredded plastic garbage bags, the burned-out hulks of tractor trailers carrying everything from gasoline to milk. There are wrecks everywhere, some no worse than fender benders, some pileups that snake along the interstate for miles, and the morning sunlight sparkles on all the broken glass.

There are no bodies. These cars have been here since the 1st Wave, long abandoned by their owners.

Not many people died in the 1st Wave, the massive electromagnetic pulse that ripped through the atmosphere at precisely eleven A.M. on the tenth day. Only around half a million, Dad guessed. Okay, half a million sounds like a lot of people, but really it's just a drop in the population bucket. World War II killed over a hundred times that number.

And we did have some time to prepare for it, though we weren't exactly sure what we were preparing for. Ten days from the first satellite pictures of the mothership passing Mars to the launch of the 1st Wave. Ten days of mayhem. Martial law, sit-ins at the UN, parades, rooftop parties, endless Internet chatter, and 24/7 coverage of the Arrival over every medium. The president addressed the nation—and then disappeared into his bunker. The Security Council went into a locked-down, closed-to-the-press emergency session.

A lot of people just split, like our neighbors, the Majewskis. Packed up their camper on the afternoon of the sixth day with everything they could fit and hit the road, joining a mass exodus to somewhere else, because anywhere else seemed safer for some reason. Thousands of people took off for the mountains . . . or the desert . . . or the swamps. You know, somewhere else.

The Majewskis' somewhere else was Disney World. They weren't the only ones. Disney set attendance records during those ten days before the EMP strike.

Daddy asked Mr. Majewski, "So why Disney World?"

And Mr. Majewski said, "Well, the kids have never been."

His kids were both in college.

Catherine, who had come home from her freshman year at Baylor the day before, asked, "Where are you guys going?"

"Nowhere," I said. And I didn't want to go anywhere. I was still living in denial, pretending all this crazy alien stuff would work out, I didn't know how, maybe with the signing of some intergalactic peace treaty. Or maybe they'd dropped by to take a couple of soil samples and go home. Or maybe they were here on vacation, like the Majewskis going to Disney World.

"You need to get out," she said. "They'll hit the cities first."

"You're probably right," I said. "They'd never dream of taking out the Magic Kingdom."

"How would you rather die?" she snapped. "Hiding under your bed or riding Thunder Mountain?"

Good question.

Daddy said the world was dividing into two camps: runners and nesters. Runners headed for the hills—or Thunder Mountain. Nesters boarded up the windows, stocked up on the canned goods and ammunition, and kept the TV tuned to CNN 24/7.

There were no messages from our galactic party crashers during those first ten days. No light shows. No landing on the South Lawn or bug-eyed, butt-headed dudes in silver jumpsuits demanding to be taken to our leader. No bright, spinning tops blaring the universal language of music. And no answer when we sent our message. Something like, "Hello, welcome to Earth. Hope you enjoy your stay. Please don't kill us."

Nobody knew what to do. We figured the government sort of did. The government had a plan for everything, so we assumed

they had a plan for E.T. showing up uninvited and unannounced, like the weird cousin nobody in the family likes to talk about.

Some people nested. Some people ran. Some got married. Some got divorced. Some made babies. Some killed themselves. We walked around like zombies, blank-faced and robotic, unable to absorb the magnitude of what was happening.

It's hard to believe now, but my family, like the vast majority of people, went about our daily lives as if the most monumentally mind-blowing thing in human history wasn't happening right over our heads. Mom and Dad went to work, Sammy went to day care, and I went to school and soccer practice. It was so normal, it was damn weird. By the end of Day One, everybody over the age of two had seen the mothership up close a thousand times, this big grayish-green glowing hulk about the size of Manhattan circling 250 miles above the Earth. NASA announced its plan to pull a space shuttle out of mothballs to attempt contact.

Well, that's good, we thought. *This silence is deafening. Why did they come billions of miles just to stare at us? It's rude.*

On Day Three, I went out with a guy named Mitchell Phelps. Well, technically we went out*side*. The date was in my backyard because of the curfew. He hit the drive-through at Starbucks on his way over, and we sat on the back patio sipping our drinks and pretending we didn't see Dad's shadow passing back and forth as he paced the living room. Mitchell had moved into town a few days before the Arrival. He sat behind me in World Lit, and I made the mistake of loaning him my highlighter. So the next thing I know he's asking me out, because if a girl loans you a highlighter she must think you're hot. I don't know why I went out with him. He wasn't that cute and he wasn't that

interesting beyond the whole New Kid aura, and he definitely wasn't Ben Parish. Nobody was—except Ben Parish—and that was the whole problem.

By the third day, you either talked about the Others all the time or you tried not to talk about them at all. I fell into the second category.

Mitchell was in the first.

"What if they're us?" he asked.

It didn't take long after the Arrival for all the conspiracy nuts to start buzzing about classified government projects or the secret plan to manufacture an alien crisis in order to take away our liberties. I thought that's where he was going and groaned.

"What?" he said. "I don't mean *us* us. I mean, what if they're us from the future?"

"And it's like *The Terminator*, right?" I said, rolling my eyes. "They've come to stop the uprising of the machines. Or maybe they *are* the machines. Maybe it's Skynet."

"I don't think so," he said, acting like I was serious. "It's the grandfather paradox."

"What is? And what the hell is the grandfather paradox?" He said it like he assumed I knew what the grandfather paradox was, because, if I didn't know, then I was a moron. I hate when people do that.

"They—I mean we—can't go back in time and change anything. If you went back in time and killed your grandfather before you were born, then you wouldn't be able to go back in time to kill your grandfather."

"Why would you want to kill your grandfather?" I twisted the straw in my strawberry Frappuccino to produce that unique straw-in-a-lid squeak.

"The point is that just showing up changes history," he said. Like I was the one who brought up time travel.

"Do we have to talk about this?"

"What else is there to talk about?" His eyebrows climbed toward his hairline. Mitchell had very bushy eyebrows. It was one of the first things I noticed about him. He also chewed his fingernails. That was the second thing I noticed. Cuticle care can tell you a lot about a person.

I pulled out my phone and texted Lizbeth:

help me

"Are you scared?" he asked. Trying to get my attention. Or for some reassurance. He was looking at me very intently.

I shook my head. "Just bored." A lie. Of course I was scared. I knew I was being mean, but I couldn't help it. For some reason I can't explain, I was mad at him. Maybe I was really mad at myself for saying yes to a date with a guy I wasn't actually interested in. Or maybe I was mad at him for not being Ben Parish, which wasn't his fault. But still.

help u do wat?

"I don't care what we talk about," he said. He was looking toward the rose bed, swirling the dregs of his coffee, his knee popping up and down so violently under the table that my cup jiggled.

mitchell. I didn't think I needed to say any more.

"Who are you texting?"

told u not to go out w him

"Nobody you know," I said. **dont know why i did**

"We can go somewhere else," he said. "You want to go to a movie?"

"There's a curfew," I reminded him. No one was allowed on the streets after nine except military and emergency vehicles.

lol to make ben jealous

"Are you pissed or something?"

"No," I said. "I told you what I was."

He pursed his lips in frustration. He didn't know what to say.

"I was just trying to figure out who they might be," he said.

"You and everybody else on the planet," I said. "Nobody actually knows, and they won't tell us, so everybody sits around guessing and theorizing, and it's all kind of pointless. Maybe they're spacefaring micemen from Planet Cheese and they've come for our provolone."

bp doesnt know i exist

"You know," he said, "it's kind of rude, texting while I'm trying to have a conversation with you."

He was right. I slipped the phone into my pocket. *What's happening to me?* I wondered. The old Cassie never would have done that. Already the Others were changing me into someone different, but I wanted to pretend nothing had changed, especially me.

"Did you hear?" he asked, going right back to the topic that I said bored me. "They're building a landing site."

I had heard. In Death Valley. That's right: Death Valley.

"Personally, I don't think it's a very smart idea," he said. "Rolling out the welcome mat."

"Why not?"

"It's been three days. Three days and they've refused all contact. If they're friendly, why wouldn't they say hello already?"

"Maybe they're just shy." Twisting my hair around my finger, tugging on it gently to produce that semipleasant pain.

"Like being the new kid," he said, the new kid.

That can't be easy, being the new kid. I felt like I should apologize for being rude. "I was kind of mean before," I admitted. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a confused look. He was talking about the aliens,

not himself, and then I said something about me, which was about neither.

"It's okay," he said. "I heard you don't date much."

Ouch.

"What else did you hear?" One of those questions you don't want to know the answer to, but still have to ask.

He sipped his latte through the little hole in the plastic lid.

"Not much. It's not like I asked around."

"You asked somebody and they told you I didn't date much."

"I just said I was thinking about asking you out and they go, Cassie's pretty cool. And I said, what's she like? And they said you were nice but don't get my hopes up because you had this thing for Ben Parish—"

"They told you that? Who told you that?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember her name."

"Was it Lizbeth Morgan?" *I'll kill her.*

"I don't know her name," he said.

"What did she look like?"

"Long brown hair. Glasses. I think her name is Carly or something."

"I don't know any . . ."

Oh God. Some Carly person I don't even know knows about me and Ben Parish—or the lack of any me and Ben Parish. And if Carly-or-something knew about it, then everybody knew about it.

"Well, they're wrong," I sputtered. "I don't have a thing for Ben Parish."

"It doesn't matter to me."

"It matters to me."

"Maybe this isn't working out," he said. "Everything I say, you either get bored or mad."

"I'm not mad," I said angrily.

"Okay, I'm wrong."

No, he was right. And I was wrong for not telling him the Cassie he knew wasn't the Cassie I used to be, the pre-Arrival Cassie who wouldn't have been mean to a mosquito. I wasn't ready to admit the truth: It wasn't just the world that had changed with the coming of the Others. We changed. I changed. The moment the mothership appeared, I started down a path that would end in the back of a convenience store behind some empty beer coolers. That night with Mitchell was only the beginning of my evolution.

Mitchell was right about the Others not stopping by just to say howdy. On the eve of the 1st Wave, the world's leading theoretical physicist, one of the smartest guys in the world (that's what popped up on the screen under his talking head: ONE OF THE SMARTEST GUYS IN THE WORLD), appeared on CNN and said, "I'm not encouraged by the silence. I can think of no benign reason for it. I'm afraid we may expect something closer to Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas than a scene from *Close Encounters*, and we all know how that turned out for the Native Americans."

I turned to my father and said, "We should nuke 'em." I had to raise my voice to be heard over the TV—Dad always jacked up the volume during the news so he could hear it over Mom's TV in the kitchen. She liked to watch TLC while she cooked. I called it the War of the Remotes.

"Cassie!" He was so shocked, his toes began to curl inside his white athletic socks. He grew up on *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* and *Star Trek* and totally bought into the idea that the Others had come to liberate us from ourselves. No more hunger. No more

wars. The eradication of disease. The secrets of the cosmos unveiled. "Don't you understand this could be the next step in our evolution? A huge leap forward. Huge." He gave me a consoling hug. "We're all very fortunate to be here to see it."

Then he added casually, like he was talking about how to fix a toaster, "Besides, a nuclear device can't do much damage in the vacuum of space. There's nothing to carry the shock wave."

"So this brainiac on TV is just full of shit?"

"Don't use that language, Cassie," he chided me. "He's entitled to his opinion, but that's all it is. An opinion."

"But what if he's right? What if that thing up there is their version of a Death Star?"

"Travel halfway across the universe just to blow us up?" He patted my leg and smiled. Mom turned up the kitchen TV. He pushed the volume in the family room to twenty-seven.

"Okay, but what about an intergalactic Mongol horde, like he was talking about?" I demanded. "Maybe they've come to conquer us, shove us into reservations, enslave us . . ."

"Cassie," he said. "Simply because something *could* happen doesn't mean it *will* happen. Anyway, it's all just speculation. This guy's. Mine. Nobody knows why they're here. Isn't it just as likely they've come all this way to save us?"

Four months after saying those words, my father was dead.

He was wrong about the Others. And I was wrong. And One of the Smartest Guys in the World was wrong.

It wasn't about saving us. And it wasn't about enslaving us or herding us into reservations.

It was about killing us.

All of us.

6

I DEBATED WHETHER to travel by day or night for a long time. Darkness is best if you're worried about them. But daylight is preferable if you want to spot a drone before it spots you.

The drones showed up at the tag end of the 3rd Wave. Cigar-shaped, dull gray in color, gliding swiftly and silently thousands of feet up. Sometimes they streak across the sky without stopping. Sometimes they circle overhead like buzzards. They can turn on a dime and come to a sudden stop, from Mach 2 to zero in less than a second. That's how we knew the drones weren't ours.

We knew they were unmanned (or un-Othered) because one of them crashed a couple miles from our refugee camp. A *thu-whump!* when it broke the sound barrier, an ear-piercing shriek as it rocketed to earth, the ground shuddering under our feet when it plowed into a fallow cornfield. A recon team hiked to the crash site to check it out. Okay, it wasn't really a team, just Dad and Hutchfield, the guy in charge of the camp. They came back to report the thing was empty. Were they sure? Maybe the pilot bailed before impact. Dad said it was packed with instruments; there wasn't any room for a pilot. "Unless they're two inches tall." That got a big laugh. Somehow it made the horror less horrible, thinking of the Others as being two-inch Borrower types.

I opted to travel by day. I could keep one eye on the sky and another on the ground. What I ended up doing is rocking my head up and down, up and down, side to side, then up again, like some groupie at a rock concert, until I was dizzy and a little sick to my stomach.

Plus there are other things at night to worry about besides drones. Wild dogs, coyotes, bears, and wolves coming down from Canada, maybe even an escaped lion or tiger from a zoo. I know, I know, there's a *Wizard of Oz* joke buried in there. Shoot me.

And though it wouldn't be *much* better, I do think I'd have a better chance against one of them in the daylight. Or even against one of my own, if I'm not the last one. What if I stumble onto another survivor who decides the best course of action is to go all Crucifix Soldier on anyone they come across?

That brings up the problem of my best course of action. Do I shoot on sight? Do I wait for them to make the first move and risk it being a deadly one? I wonder, not for the first time, why the hell we didn't come up with some kind of code or secret handshake or something before they showed up—something that would identify us as the good guys. We had no way of knowing they would show up, but we were pretty sure something would sooner or later.

It's hard to plan for what comes next when what comes next is not something you planned for.

Try to spot them first, I decided. Take cover. No showdowns. No more Crucifix Soldiers!

The day is bright and windless but cold. The sky cloudless. Walking along, bobbing my head up and down, swinging it from side to side, backpack popping against one shoulder blade, the rifle against the other, walking on the outside edge of the median that separates the southbound from the northbound lanes, stopping every few strides to whip around and scan the terrain behind me. An hour. Two. And I've traveled no more than a mile.

The creepiest thing, creepier than the abandoned cars and the snarl of crumpled metal and the broken glass sparkling in the

October sunlight, creepier than all the trash and discarded crap littering the median, most of it hidden by the knee-high grass so the strip of land looks lumpy, covered in boils, the creepiest thing is the silence.

The Hum is gone.

You remember the Hum.

Unless you grew up on top of a mountain or lived in a cave your whole life, the Hum was always around you. That's what life was. It was the sea we swam in. The constant sound of all the things we built to make life easy and a little less boring. The mechanical song. The electronic symphony. The Hum of all our things and all of us. Gone.

This is the sound of the Earth before we conquered it.

Sometimes in my tent, late at night, I think I can hear the stars scraping against the sky. That's how quiet it is. After a while it's almost more than I can stand. I want to scream at the top of my lungs. I want to sing, shout, stamp my feet, clap my hands, anything to declare my presence. My conversation with the soldier had been the first words I'd said aloud in weeks.

The Hum died on the tenth day after the Arrival. I was sitting in third period texting Lizbeth the last text I will ever send. I don't remember exactly what it said.

Eleven A.M. A warm, sunny day in early spring. A day for doodling and dreaming and wishing you were anywhere but Ms. Paulson's calculus class.

The 1st Wave rolled in without much fanfare. It wasn't dramatic. There was no shock and awe.

The lights just winked out.

Ms. Paulson's overhead died.

The screen on my phone went black.

Somebody in the back of the room squealed. Classic. It doesn't matter what time of day it happens—the power goes out, and somebody yelps like the building's collapsing.

Ms. Paulson told us to stay in our seats. That's the other thing people do when the power goes out. They jump up to . . . To what? It's weird. We're so used to electricity, when it's gone, we don't know what to do. So we jump up or squeal or start jabbering like idiots. We panic. It's like someone cut off our oxygen. The Arrival had made it worse, though. Ten days on pins and needles waiting for something to happen while nothing is happening makes you jumpy.

So when they pulled the plug on us, we freaked a little more than normal.

Everybody started talking at once. When I announced that my phone had died, out came everyone's dead phone. Neal Croskey, who was sitting in the back of the room listening to his iPod while Ms. Paulson lectured, pulled the buds from his ears and wondered aloud why the music had died.

The next thing you do when the plug's pulled, after panicking, is run to the nearest window. You don't know why exactly. It's that better-see-what's-going-on feeling. The world works from the outside in. So if the lights go off, you look outside.

And Ms. Paulson, randomly moving around the mob milling in front of the windows: "Quiet! Back to your seats. I'm sure there'll be an announcement . . ."

There was one, about a minute later. Not over the intercom, though, and not from Mr. Faulks, the vice principal. It came from the sky, from them. In the form of a 727 tumbling end over end to the Earth from ten thousand feet until it disappeared behind a line of trees and exploded, sending up a fireball that reminded me of the mushroom cloud of an atomic blast.

Hey, Earthlings! Let's get this party started!

You'd think seeing something like that would send us diving under our desks. It didn't. We crowded against the window and scanned the cloudless sky for the flying saucer that must have taken the plane down. It had to be a flying saucer, right? We knew how a top-notch alien invasion was run. Flying saucers zipping through the atmosphere, squadrons of F-16s hot on their heels, surface-to-air missiles and tracers screaming from the bunkers. In an unreal and admittedly sick way, we wanted to see something like that. It would make this a perfectly normal alien invasion.

For a half hour we waited by the windows. Nobody said much. Ms. Paulson told us to go back to our seats. We ignored her. Thirty minutes into the 1st Wave and already social order was breaking down. People kept checking their phones. We couldn't connect it: the plane crashing, the lights going out, our phones dying, the clock on the wall with the big hand frozen on the twelve, little hand on the eleven.

Then the door flew open and Mr. Faulks told us to head over to the gym. I thought that was really smart. Get all of us in one place so the aliens didn't have to waste a lot of ammunition.

So we trooped over to the gym and sat in the bleachers in near total darkness while the principal paced back and forth, stopping every now and then to yell at us to be quiet and wait for our parents to get there.

What about the students whose cars were at school? Couldn't they leave?

"Your cars won't work."

WTF? What does he mean, our cars won't work?

An hour passed. Then two. I sat next to Lizbeth. We didn't talk much, and when we did, we whispered. We weren't afraid of the

principal; we were listening. I'm not sure what we were listening for, but it was like that quiet before the clouds open up and the thunder smashes down.

"This could be it," Lizbeth whispered. She rubbed her nose nervously. Dug her lacquered nails into her dyed blond hair. Tapped her foot. Rolled the pad of her finger over her eyelid: She had just started wearing contacts and they bugged her constantly.

"It's definitely something," I whispered back.

"I mean, this could be *it*. Like *it* it. The end."

She kept slipping the battery out of her phone and putting it back in. It was better than doing nothing, I guess.

She started to cry. I took her phone away and held her hand. Looked around. She wasn't the only one crying. Other kids were praying. And others were doing both, crying and praying. The teachers were huddled up by the gym doors, forming a human shield in case the creatures from outer space decided to storm the floor.

"There's so much I wanted to do," Lizbeth said. "I've never even . . ." She choked back a sob. "You know."

"I've got a feeling a lot of 'you know' is going on right now," I said. "Probably right underneath these bleachers."

"You think?" She wiped her cheeks with the palm of her hand. "What about you?"

"About 'you know'?" I had no problem with talking about sex. My problem was talking about sex as it related to me.

"Oh, I know you haven't 'you know.' God! I'm not talking about that."

"I thought we were."

"I'm talking about our lives, Cassie! Jesus, this could be the end of the freakin' world, and all you want to do is talk about sex!"

She pulled her phone out of my hand and fumbled with the battery cover.

"Which is why you should just tell him," she said, fiddling with the drawstrings of her hoodie.

"Tell who what?" I knew exactly what she meant; I was just buying time.

"Ben! You should tell him how you feel. How you've felt since the third grade."

"This is a joke, right?" I felt my face getting hot.

"And then you should have sex with him."

"Lizbeth, shut up."

"It's the truth."

"I haven't wanted to have sex with Ben Parish since the third grade," I whispered. The third grade? I glanced over at her to see if she was really listening. Apparently, she wasn't.

"If I were you, I'd go right up to him and say, 'I think this is it. This is it, and I'll be damned if I'm going to die in this school gymnasium without ever having sex with you.' And then you know what I'd do?"

"What?" I was fighting back a laugh, picturing the look on his face.

"I'd take him outside to the flower garden and have sex with him."

"In the flower garden?"

"Or the locker room." She waved her hand around frantically to include the entire school—or maybe the whole world. "It doesn't matter where."

"The locker room smells." I looked two rows down at the outline of Ben Parish's gorgeous head. "That kind of thing only happens in the movies," I said.

"Yeah, totally unrealistic, not like what's happening right now."

She was right. It was totally unrealistic. Both scenarios, an alien invasion of the Earth and a Ben Parish invasion of me.

"At least you could tell him how you feel," she said, reading my mind.

Could, yes. Ever would, well . . .

And I never did. That was the last time I saw Ben Parish, sitting in that dark, stuffy gymnasium (Home of the Hawks!) two rows down from me, and only the back part of him. He probably died in the 3rd Wave like almost everybody else, and I never told him how I felt. I could have. He knew who I was; he sat behind me in a couple of classes.

He probably doesn't remember, but in middle school we rode the same bus, and there was an afternoon when I overheard him talking about his little sister being born the day before and I turned around and said, "My brother was born last week!" And he said, "Really?" Not sarcastic, but like he thought it was a cool coincidence, and for about a month I went around thinking we had this special connection based on babies. Then we were in high school and he became the star wide receiver for the team and I became just another girl watching him score from the stands. I would see him in class or in the hallway, and sometimes I had to fight the urge to run up to him and say, "Hi, I'm Cassie, the girl from the bus. Do you remember the babies?"

The funny thing is, he probably would have. Ben Parish couldn't be satisfied with being the most gorgeous guy in school. Just to torment me with his perfection, he also insisted on being one of the smartest. And have I mentioned he was kind to small animals and children? His little sister was on the sidelines at every game, and when we took the district title, Ben ran straight to

the sidelines, hoisted her onto his shoulders, and led the parade around the track with her waving to the crowd like a homecoming queen.

Oh, and one more thing: his killer smile. Don't get me started.

After another hour in the dark and stuffy gym, I saw my dad appear in the doorway. He gave a little wave, like he showed up at my school every day to take me home after alien attacks. I hugged Lizbeth and told her I'd call as soon as the phones started working again. I was still practicing pre-invasion thinking. You know, the power goes out, but it always comes back on. So I just gave her a hug and I don't remember telling her that I loved her.

We went outside and I said, "Where's the car?"

And Dad said the car wasn't working. No cars were working. The streets were littered with stalled-out cars and buses and motorcycles and trucks, smashups and clusters of wrecks on every block, cars folded around light poles and sticking out of buildings. A lot of people were trapped when the EMP hit; the automatic locks on the doors didn't work, and they had to break out of their own cars or sit there and wait for someone to rescue them. The injured people who could still move crawled onto the roadside and sidewalks to wait for the paramedics, but no paramedics came because the ambulances and the fire trucks and the cop cars didn't work, either. Everything that ran on batteries or electricity or had an engine died at eleven A.M.

Dad walked as he talked, keeping a tight grip on my wrist, like he was afraid something might swoop down out of the sky and snatch me away.

"Nothing's working. No electricity, no phones, no plumbing . . ."

"We saw a plane crash."

He nodded. “I’m sure they all did. Anything and everything in the sky when it hit. Fighter jets, helicopters, troop transports . . .”

“When what hit?”

“EMP,” he said. “Electromagnetic pulse. Generate one large enough and you knock out the entire grid. Power. Communications. Transportation. Anything that flies or drives is zapped out.”

It was a mile and a half from my school to our house. The longest mile and a half I’ve ever walked. It felt as if a curtain had fallen over everything, a curtain painted to look exactly like what it was hiding. There were glimpses, though, little peeks behind the curtain that told you something had gone very wrong. Like all the people standing on their front porches holding their dead phones, looking up at the sky, or bending over the open hoods of their cars, fiddling with wires, because that’s what you do when your car dies—you fiddle with wires.

“But it’s okay,” he said, squeezing my wrist. “It’s okay. There’s a good chance our backup systems weren’t crippled, and I’m sure the government has a contingency plan, protected bases, that sort of thing.”

“And how does pulling our plug fit into their plan to help us along in the next stage of our evolution, Dad?”

I regretted the words the instant I said them. But I was freaking out. He didn’t take it the wrong way. He looked at me and smiled reassuringly and said, “Everything’s going to be okay,” because that’s what I wanted him to say and it’s what he wanted to say and that’s what you do when the curtain is falling—you give the line that the audience wants to hear.

7

AROUND NOON on my mission to keep my promise, I stop for a water break and a Slim Jim. Every time I eat a Slim Jim or a can of sardines or anything prepackaged, I think, *Well, there's one less of that in the world.* Whittling away the evidence of our having been here one bite at a time.

One of these days, I've decided, I'm going to work up the nerve to catch a chicken and wring its delicious neck. I would kill for a cheeseburger. Honestly. If I stumbled across someone eating a cheeseburger, I would kill them for it.

There are plenty of cows around. I could shoot one and carve it up with my bowie knife. I'm pretty sure I'd have no problem slaughtering a cow. The hard part would be cooking it. Having a fire, even in daylight, was the surest way to invite them to the cookout.

A shadow shoots across the grass a dozen yards in front of me. I jerk my head back, knocking it hard against the side of a Honda Civic I was leaning against while I enjoyed my snack. It wasn't a drone. It was a bird, a seagull of all things, skimming along with barely a flick of its outstretched wings. A shiver of revulsion goes down my spine. I hate birds. I didn't before the Arrival. I didn't after the 1st Wave. I didn't after the 2nd Wave, which really didn't affect me that much.

But after the 3rd Wave, I hated them. It wasn't their fault, I knew that. It was like a man in front of a firing squad hating the bullets, but I couldn't help it.

Birds suck.

8

AFTER THREE DAYS on the road, I've determined that cars are pack animals.

They prowl in groups. They die in clumps. Clumps of smash-ups. Clumps of stalls. They glimmer in the distance like jewels. And suddenly the clumps stop. The road is empty for miles. There's just me and the asphalt river cutting through a defile of half-naked trees, their leaves crinkled and clinging desperately to their dark branches. There's the road and the naked sky and the tall, brown grass and me.

These empty stretches are the worst. Cars provide cover. And shelter. I sleep in the undamaged ones (I haven't found a locked one yet). If you can call it sleep. Stale, stuffy air; you can't crack the windows, and leaving the door open is out of the question. The gnaw of hunger. And the night thoughts. *Alone, alone, alone.*

And the baddest of the bad night thoughts:

I'm no alien drone designer, but if I were going to make one, I'd make sure that its detection device was sensitive enough to pick up a body's heat signature through a car roof. It never failed: The moment I started to drift off, I imagined all four doors flying open and dozens of hands reaching for me, hands attached to arms attached to whatever they are. And then I'm up, fumbling with my M16, peeking over the backseat, then doing a 360, feeling trapped and more than a little blind behind the fogged-up windows.

Dawn comes. I wait for the morning fog to burn off, then sip some water, brush my teeth, double-check my weapons, inventory

my supplies, and hit the road again. Look up, look down, look all around. Don't pause at the exits. Water's fine for now. No way am I going anywhere near a town unless I have to.

For a lot of reasons.

You know how you can tell when you're getting close to one? The smell. You can smell a town from miles away.

It smells like smoke. And raw sewage. And death.

In the city it's hard to take two steps without stumbling over a corpse. Funny thing: People die in clumps, too.

I begin to smell Cincinnati about a mile before spotting the exit sign. A thick column of smoke rises lazily toward the cloudless sky.

Cincinnati is burning.

I'm not surprised. After the 3rd Wave, the second most common thing you found in cities, after the bodies, were fires. A single lightning strike could take out ten city blocks. There was no one left to put the fires out.

My eyes start to water. The stench of Cincinnati makes me gag. I stop long enough to tie a rag around my mouth and nose and then quicken my pace. I pull the rifle off my shoulder and cradle it as I quickstep. I have a bad feeling about Cincinnati. The old voice inside my head is awake.

Hurry, Cassie. Hurry.

And then, somewhere between Exits 17 and 18, I find the bodies.

9

THERE ARE THREE OF THEM, not in a clump like city folk, but spaced out in the median strip. The first one is an older guy, around my dad's age, I guess. Wearing blue jeans and a Bengals warm-up. Facedown, arms outstretched. He was shot in the back of the head.

The second, about a dozen feet away, is a young woman, a little older than I am and dressed in a pair of men's pajama pants and Victoria's Secret tee. A streak of purple in her short-cropped hair. A skull ring on her left index finger. Black nail polish, badly chipped. And a bullet hole in the back of her head.

Another few feet and there's the third. A kid around eleven or twelve. Brand-new white basketball high-tops. Black sweatshirt. Hard to tell what his face used to look like.

I leave the kid and go back to the woman. Kneel in the tall brown grass beside her. Touch her pale neck. Still warm.

Oh no. No, no, no.

I trot back to the first guy. Kneel. Touch the palm of his outstretched hand. Look over at the bloody hole between his ears. Shiny. Still wet.

I freeze. Behind me, the road. In front of me, more road. To my right, trees. To my left, more trees. Clumps of cars on the southbound lane, the nearest grouping about a hundred feet away. Something tells me to look up. Straight up.

A fleck of dull gray against the backdrop of dazzling autumnal blue.

Motionless.

Hello, Cassie. My name is Mr. Drone. Nice to meet you!

I stand up, and when I stand up—the moment I stand up; if I had stayed frozen there a millisecond longer, Mr. Bengals and I would be sporting matching holes—something slams into my leg, a hot punch just above my knee that knocks me off balance, sending me sprawling backward onto my butt.

I didn't hear the shot. There was the cool wind in the grass and my own hot breath under the rag and the blood rushing in my ears—that's all there was before the bullet struck.

Silencer.

That makes sense. Of course they'd use silencers. And now I have the perfect name for them: Silencers. A name that fits the job description.

Something takes over when you're facing death. The front part of your brain lets go, gives up control to the oldest part of you, the part that takes care of your heartbeat and breathing and the blinking of your eyes. The part nature built first to keep your ass alive. The part that stretches time like a gigantic piece of toffee, making a second seem like an hour and a minute longer than a summer afternoon.

I lunge forward for my rifle—I had dropped the M16 when the round punched home—and the ground in front of me explodes, showering me with shredded grass and hunks of dirt and gravel.

Okay, forget the M16.

I yank the Luger from my waistband and do a sort of running hop—or a hopping run—toward the closest car. There isn't much pain—although my guess is that we're going to get very intimate later—but I can feel the blood soaking into my jeans by the time I reach the car, an older model Buick sedan.

The rear windshield shatters as I dive down. I scoot on my back till I'm all the way under the car. I'm not a big girl by any

stretch, but it's a tight fit, no room to roll over, no way to turn if he shows up on the left side.

Cornered.

Smart, Cassie, real smart. Straight As last semester? Honor roll? Riiiiight.

You should have stayed in your little stretch of woods in your little tent with your little books and your cute little mementos. At least when they came for you, there'd be room to run.

The minutes spin out. I lie on my back and bleed onto the cold concrete. Rolling my head to the right, to the left, raising it a half inch to look past my feet toward the back of the car. Where the hell is he? What's taking so long? Then it hits me:

He's using a high-powered sniper rifle. Has to be. Which means he could have been over a half mile away when he shot me.

Which also means I have more time than I first thought. Time to come up with something besides a blubbery, desperate, disjointed prayer.

Make him go away. Make him be quick. Let me live. Let him end it . . .

Shaking uncontrollably. I'm sweating; I'm freezing cold.

You're going into shock. Think, Cassie.

Think.

It's what we're made for. It's what got us here. It's the reason I have this car to hide under. We are human.

And humans think. They plan. They dream, and then they make the dream real.

Make it real, Cassie.

Unless he drops down, he won't be able to get to me. And when he drops down . . . when he dips his head to look at me . . . when he reaches in to grab my ankle and drag me out . . .

No. He's too smart for that. He's going to assume I'm armed. He wouldn't risk it. Not that Silencers care whether they live or die . . . or *do* they care? Do Silencers know fear? They don't love life—I've seen enough to prove that. But do they love their own lives more than they love taking someone else's?

Time stretches out. A minute's longer than a season. What's taking him so damn long?

It's an either/or world now. Either he's coming to finish it or he isn't. But he has to finish it, doesn't he? Isn't that the reason he's here? Isn't that the whole friggin' point?

Either/or: Either I run—or hop or crawl or roll—or I stay under this car and bleed to death. If I risk escape, it's a turkey shoot. I won't make it two feet. If I stay, same result, only more painful, more fearful, and much, much slower.

Black stars blossom and dance in front of my eyes. I can't get enough air into my lungs.

I reach up with my left hand and yank the cloth from my face.

The cloth.

Cassie, you're an idiot.

I set the gun down beside me. That's the hardest part—making myself let go of the gun.

I lift my leg, slide the rag beneath it. I can't lift my head to see what I'm doing. I stare past the black, blossoming stars at the grimy guts of the Buick as I pull the two ends together, cinch them tight, as tight as I can, and fumble with the knot. I reach down and explore the wound with my fingertips. It's still bleeding, but a trickle compared to the bubbling gusher I had before tying off the tourniquet.

I pick up the gun. Better. My eyesight clears a little, and I don't feel quite so cold. I shift a couple of inches to the left; I don't like lying in my own blood.

Where is he? He's had plenty of time to finish this . . .

Unless he is finished.

That brings me up short. For a few seconds, I totally forget to breathe.

He's not coming. He's not coming because he doesn't need to come. He knows you won't dare come out, and if you don't come out and run, you won't make it. He knows you'll starve or bleed to death or die of dehydration.

He knows what you know: Run = die. Stay = die.

Time for him to move on to the next one.

If there is a next one.

If I'm not the last one.

Come on, Cassie! From seven billion to just one in five months? You're not the last, and even if you are the last human being on Earth—especially *if you are—you can't let it end this way. Trapped under a goddamned Buick, bleeding until all the blood is gone—is this how humanity waves good-bye?*

Hell no.

10

THE 1ST WAVE took out half a million people.

The 2nd Wave put that number to shame.

In case you don't know, we live on a restless planet. The continents sit on slabs of rock, called tectonic plates, and those plates float on a sea of molten lava. They're constantly scraping and rubbing and pushing against one another, creating enormous pressure.

Over time the pressure builds and builds, until the plates slip, releasing huge amounts of energy in the form of earthquakes. If one of those quakes happens along one of the fault lines that ring every continent, the shock wave produces a superwave called a tsunami.

Over 40 percent of the world's population lives within sixty miles of a coastline. That's three billion people.

All the Others had to do was make it rain.

Take a metal rod twice as tall as the Empire State Building and three times as heavy. Position it over one of these fault lines. Drop it from the upper atmosphere. You don't need any propulsion or guidance system; just let it fall. Thanks to gravity, by the time it reaches the surface, it's traveling twelve miles per second, twenty times faster than a speeding bullet.

It hits the surface with a force one billion times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Bye-bye, New York. Bye, Sydney. Good-bye, California, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, British Columbia. So long, Eastern Seaboard.

Japan, Hong Kong, London, Rome, Rio.

Nice to know you. Hope you enjoyed your stay!

The 1st Wave was over in seconds.

The 2nd Wave lasted a little longer. About a day.

The 3rd Wave? That took a little longer—twelve weeks. Twelve weeks to kill . . . well, Dad figured 97 percent of those of us unlucky enough to have survived the first two waves.

Ninety-seven percent of four billion? You do the math.

That's when the Alien Empire descended in their flying saucers and started blasting away, right? When the peoples of the Earth united under one banner to play David versus Goliath. Our tanks against your ray guns. Bring it on!

We weren't that lucky.

And they weren't that stupid.

How do you waste nearly four billion people in three months?

Birds.

How many birds are there in the world? Wanna guess? A million? A billion? How about over three hundred billion? That's about seventy-five birds for each man, woman, and child still alive after the first two waves.

There are thousands of species of bird on every continent. And birds don't recognize borders. They also crap a lot. They crap five or six times a day. That's over a trillion little missiles raining down each day, every day.

You couldn't invent a more efficient delivery system for a virus that has a 97 percent kill rate.

My father thought they must have taken something like Ebola Zaire and genetically altered it. Ebola can't spread through the air. But change a single protein and you can make it airborne, like the flu. The virus takes up residence in your lungs. You get a bad cough. Fever. Your head starts to hurt. Hurt bad. You start spitting up little drops of virus-laden blood. The bug moves into your liver, your kidneys, your brain. You're packing a billion of them now. You've become a viral bomb. And when you explode, you blast everyone around you with the virus. They call it bleeding out. Like rats fleeing a sinking ship, the virus erupts out of every opening. Your mouth, your nose, your ears, your ass, even your eyes. You literally cry tears of blood.

We had different names for it. The Red Death or the Blood Plague. The Pestilence. The Red Tsunami. The Fourth Horseman. Whatever you wanted to call it, after three months, ninety-seven out of every hundred people were dead.

That's a lot of bloody tears.

Time was flowing in reverse. The 1st Wave knocked us back to the eighteenth century. The next two slammed us into the Neolithic.

We were hunter-gatherers again. Nomads. Bottom of the pyramid.

But we weren't ready to give up hope. Not yet.

There were still enough of us left to fight back.

We couldn't take them head-on, but we could fight a guerilla war. We could go all asymmetrical on their alien asses. We had enough guns and ammo and even some transport that survived the 1st Wave. Our militaries had been decimated, but there were still functional units on every continent. There were bunkers and caves and underground bases where we could hide for years. *You be America, alien invaders, and we'll be Vietnam.*

And the Others go, *Yeah, okay, right.*

We thought they had thrown everything at us—or at least the worst, because it was hard to imagine anything worse than the Red Death. Those of us who survived the 3rd Wave—the ones with a natural immunity to the disease—hunkered down and stocked up and waited for the People in Charge to tell us what to do. We knew somebody had to be in charge, because occasionally a fighter jet would scream across the sky and we heard what sounded like gun battles in the distance and the rumble of troop carriers just over the horizon.

I guess my family was luckier than most. The Fourth Horseman rode off with my mom, but Dad, Sammy, and I survived. Dad boasted about our superior genes. Not something you'd normally do, brag on top of an Everest of nearly seven billion dead people. Dad was just being Dad, trying to put the best spin he could on the eve of human extinction.

Most cities and towns were abandoned in the wake of the Red

Tsunami. There was no electricity, no plumbing, the shops and stores had long since been looted of anything valuable. Raw sewage was an inch deep on some streets. Fires from summer lightning storms were common.

Then there was the problem of the bodies.

As in, they were everywhere. Houses, shelters, hospitals, apartments, office buildings, schools, churches and synagogues, and warehouses.

There's a tipping point when the sheer volume of death overwhelms you. You can't bury or burn the bodies fast enough. That summer of the Pestilence was brutally hot, and the stench of rotting flesh hung in the air like an invisible, noxious fog. We soaked strips of cloth in perfume and tied them over our mouths and noses, and by the end of the day the reek had soaked into the material and all you could do was sit there and gag.

Until—funny thing—you got used to it.

We waited out the 3rd Wave barricaded inside our house. Partly because there was a quarantine. Partly because some pretty whacked-out people roamed the streets, breaking into houses and setting fires, the whole murder, rape, and pillaging thing. Partly because we were scared out of our minds waiting for what might come next.

But mostly because Dad didn't want to leave Mom. She was too sick to travel, and he couldn't bring himself to abandon her.

She told him to go. Leave her behind. She was going to die anyway. It wasn't about her anymore. It was about me and Sammy. About keeping us safe. About the future and hanging on to the hope that tomorrow would be better than today.

Dad didn't argue. But he didn't leave her, either. He waited for the inevitable, keeping her as comfortable as possible, and looked at maps and made lists and gathered supplies. This was

around the time the whole book-hoarding, we-have-to-rebuild-civilization kick started. On nights when the sky wasn't totally blanketed in smoke, we went into the backyard and took turns with my old telescope, watching the mothership sail majestically across the backdrop of the Milky Way. The stars were brighter now, brilliantly bright, without our man-made lights to dim them.

"What are they waiting for?" I would ask him. I was still expecting—like everybody else—the saucers and the mechanical walkers and the laser cannons. "Why don't they just get it over with?"

And Daddy would shake his head. "I don't know, pumpkin," he would say. "Maybe it is over. Maybe the goal isn't to kill all of us, just wean us down to a manageable number."

"And then what? What do they want?"

"I think the better question is what they need," he said gently, as if he were breaking some really bad news. "They're being very careful, you know."

"Careful?"

"To not damage it more than absolutely necessary. It's the reason they're here, Cassie. They need the Earth."

"But not us," I whispered. I was about to lose it—again. For about the trillionth time.

He put his hand on my shoulder—for about the trillionth time—and said, "Well, we had our shot. And we weren't handling our inheritance very well. I bet if we could somehow go back and interview the dinosaurs before the asteroid struck . . ."

That's when I punched him as hard as I could. Ran inside.

I don't know which is worse, inside or outside. Outside you feel totally exposed, constantly watched, naked beneath the naked sky. But inside it's perpetual twilight. Boarded-up windows that block out the sun during the day. Candles at night, but we're

running low on candles, can't spare more than one per room, and deep shadows lurk in once-familiar corners.

"What is it, Cassie?" Sammy. Five. Adorable. Big brown teddy-bear eyes, clutching the other member of the family with big brown eyes, the stuffed one I now have stowed in the bottom of my backpack.

"Why are you crying?"

Seeing my tears got his started.

I brushed past him, headed for the room of the sixteen-year-old human dinosaur, *Cassiopeia Sullivanus extinctus*. Then I went back to him. I couldn't leave him crying like that. We'd gotten pretty tight since Mom got sick. Nearly every night bad dreams chased him into my room, and he'd crawl in bed with me and press his face against my chest, and sometimes he forgot and called me Mommy.

"Did you see them, Cassie? Are they coming?"

"No, kiddo," I said, wiping away his tears. "No one's coming."

Not yet.

11

MOM DIED ON A TUESDAY.

Dad buried her in the backyard, in the rose bed. She had asked for that before she died. At the height of the Pestilence, when hundreds were dying every day, most of the bodies were hauled to the outskirts and burned. Dying towns were ringed by the constantly smoldering bonfires of the dead.

He told me to stay with Sammy. Sammy, who'd gone zombie-like on us, shuffling around, mouth hanging open or sucking his thumb like he was two again, with this blankness in his teddy-bear eyes. Just a few months ago, Mom was pushing him on a swing, taking him to karate classes, washing his hair, dancing with him to his favorite song. Now she was wrapped in a white sheet and riding on his daddy's shoulder into the backyard.

I saw Dad through the kitchen window kneeling by the shallow grave. His head was down. Shoulders jerking. I'd never seen him lose it, not once, since the Arrival. Things kept getting worse, and just when you thought they couldn't get any worse, they got even worse, but Dad never freaked. Even when Mom started showing the first signs of infection, he stayed calm, especially in front of her. He didn't talk about what was happening outside the barricaded doors and windows. He laid wet cloths over her forehead. He bathed her, changed her, fed her. Not once did I see him cry in front of her. While some people were shooting themselves and hanging themselves and swallowing handfuls of pills and jumping from high places, Dad pushed back against the darkness.

He sang to her and repeated stupid jokes she'd heard a thousand times, and he lied. He lied the way a parent lies to you, the good lie that helps you go to sleep.

"Heard another plane today. Sounded like a fighter. Means some of our stuff must have made it through."

"Your fever's down a bit, and your eyes look clearer today. Maybe this isn't it. Might just be your garden-variety flu."

In the final hours, wiping away her bloody tears.

Holding her while she barfed up the black, viral stew her stomach had become.

Bringing me and Sammy into the room to say good-bye.

"It's all right," she told Sammy. "Everything is going to be all right."

To me she said, "He needs you now, Cassie. Take care of him. Take care of your father."

I told her she was going to get better. Some people did. They got sick, and then suddenly the virus let go. Nobody understood why. Maybe it decided it didn't like the way you tasted. And I didn't say she was going to get better to ease her fear. I really believed it. I had to believe it.

"You're all they have," Mom said. Her last words to me.

The mind was the last thing to go, washed away in the red waters of the Tsunami. The virus took total control. Some people went into a frenzy as it boiled their brains. They punched, clawed, kicked, bit. Like the virus that needed us also hated us and couldn't wait to get rid of us.

My mother looked at my dad and didn't know him. Didn't know where she was. Who she was. What was happening to her. There was this, like, permanent, creepy smile, cracked lips pulled back from bleeding gums, her teeth stained with blood. Sounds came out of her mouth, but they weren't words. The place in her brain that made words was packed with virus, and the virus didn't know language—it knew only how to make more of itself.

And then my mother died in a fury of jerks and gargled screams, her uninvited guests rocketing out of every orifice, because she was done, they'd used her up, time to turn off the lights and find a new home.

Dad bathed her one last time. Combed her hair. Scrubbed the dried blood from her teeth. When he came to tell me she was gone, he was calm. He didn't lose it. He held me while I lost it.

Now I was watching him through the kitchen window. Kneeling

beside her in the rose bed, thinking no one could see him, my father let go of the rope he'd been clinging to, loosened the line that had kept him steady all that time while everyone around him went into free fall.

I made sure Sammy was okay and went outside. I sat next to him. Put my hand on his shoulder. The last time I'd touched my father, it was a lot harder and with my fist. I didn't say anything, and he didn't, either, not for a long time.

He slipped something into my hand. Mom's wedding ring. He said she'd want me to have it.

"We're leaving, Cassie. Tomorrow morning."

I nodded. I knew she was the only reason we hadn't left yet. The delicate stems on the roses bobbed and swayed, as if echoing my nod. "Where are we going?"

"Away." He looked around, and his eyes were wide and frightened. "It isn't safe anymore."

Duh, I thought. *When was it ever?*

"Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is just over a hundred miles from here. If we push and the weather stays good, we can be there in five or six days."

"And then what?" The Others had conditioned us to think this way: *Okay, this, and then what?* I looked to my father to tell me. He was the smartest man I knew. If he didn't have an answer, there was no one who did. I sure didn't. And I sure wanted him to. I needed him to.

He shook his head like he didn't understand the question.

"What's at Wright-Patterson?" I asked.

"I don't know that anything's there." He tried out a smile and grimaced, like smiling hurt.

"Then why are we going?"

"Because we can't stay here," he said through gritted teeth. "And if we can't stay here, we have to go somewhere. If there's anything like a government left at all . . ."

He shook his head. He hadn't come outside for this. He had come outside to bury his wife.

"Go inside, Cassie."

"I'll help you."

"I don't need your help."

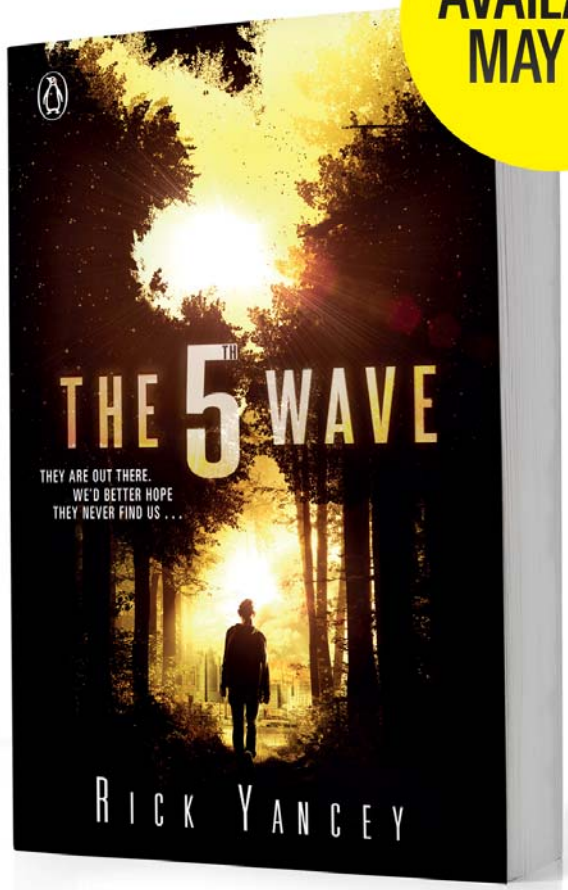
"She's my mother. I loved her, too. Please let me help." I was crying again. He didn't see. He wasn't looking at me, and he wasn't looking at Mom. He wasn't looking at anything, really. There was, like, this black hole where the world used to be, and we were both falling toward it. What could we hold on to? I pulled his hand off Mom's body and pressed it against my cheek and told him I loved him and that Mom loved him and that everything would be okay, and the black hole lost a little of its strength.

"Go inside, Cassie," he said gently. "Sammy needs you more than she does."

I went inside. Sammy was sitting on the floor in his room, playing with his X-wing starfighter, destroying the Death Star. "Shroooooom, shroooooom. I'm going in, Red One!"

And outside, my father knelt in the freshly turned earth. Brown dirt, red rose, gray sky, white sheet.

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